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Why Art Makes Kids Smarter

A Mom Congress Report about the importance of music, drama, dance, and drawing and painting in the classroom

By Nancy Kalish, *Parenting*

Think back to when you were in elementary school. In between doing all the dittos and spelling tests and times tables, there were specials (and aptly named, too). Nothing was quite as exciting as the gleeful anticipation of putting on your smock for art class or pulling out the wooden recorders for music. And when it was time for the class play, just forget it. Whether you starred as Snow White or donned a furry costume as Woodland Creature #7, school couldn't get much better. And that was the whole point.

These days, however, not only are many kids lucky if they have art-on-a-cart, but when they do, proponents often have to justify the programs in relation to students' performance on standardized reading and math tests. Because in the age of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), few things matter more than test scores (read our report on NCLB at [Parenting.com/nclb](http://parenting.com/nclb)). Well, the bad news first: Although kids who are involved in the arts do tend to test better, there's no direct cause-and-effect evidence that participation actually helps raise scores.

This sounds like awful news and justification to slash school arts programs even further, right? But "dismissing the arts if they don't directly boost scores is a big mistake," says Richard Kessler, executive director of the Center for Arts Education in New York City. "In fact, plenty of research shows that children who spend time in school doing visual art, performing music or dance, or even acting in a play gain a whole set of creative and analytical skills that are quickly disappearing from the rest of the curriculum."

That's because in the majority of public schools, the emphasis is on test prep, which means lots of memorization, rote learning, and following directions. In fact, many have more than doubled instructional time in math and English language arts (ELA) since NCLB was enacted in 2002. More math and reading instruction might sound like a good thing -- that is, until you realize what's being eliminated to make room for it. Those same schools have cut arts education by an average of 35



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percent. Ideally, children should have an hour of each arts discipline once a week. But few schools make the grade. Twelve percent of school districts don't offer any arts instruction at all.

And it's not like putting all the focus on nonstop test-prep is having the desired effect. Test scores have failed to rise as hoped. Meanwhile, Hong Kong as well as Japan, Canada, Finland, and five other countries that consistently outperform us in math and reading all require extensive education in the arts without narrowing their curriculum, according to a new report from Common Core, a Washington, DC, educational research and advocacy organization. For example, national guidelines in Hong Kong recommend that fourth-graders visit artists' studios and study great works of sculpture and painting; in Ontario, Canada, learning musical composition and conducting are standard for eighth-graders. "The situation here is extremely frustrating," says Lynne Munson, Common Core's executive director. "We have lots of proof that a broad education that includes the arts works better than what we're doing -- and yet we're ignoring it."

All of this has education experts worried indeed. It should also worry parents. "It's not as easy to test the skills that children learn from the arts, but that doesn't make them any less important," says Kimberly Sheridan, Ed.D., coauthor of *Studio Thinking: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education*. According to a recent study she conducted with colleagues at Harvard's Project Zero, an educational research group, participating in a school arts program increases a child's ability to:

- ▶ Observe the world carefully and discard preconceptions and envision something and then create it
- ▶ Go beyond just learning a skill to express a personal voice
- ▶ Problem-solve and persist despite frustration and setbacks
- ▶ Reflect on the results and ask what could improve them

What's more, other research using brain imaging along with behavioral assessments has established strong links between the arts and specific cognitive skills. In a landmark 2008 study by the nonprofit Dana Foundation, neuroscientists at seven universities found that:

- ▶ Musical training improves reading by helping children distinguish the sound structure of words
- ▶ Acting boosts memory and the ability to articulate ideas
- ▶ Strong interest in a performing art leads to better attention and memory

But perhaps most crucial of all, the arts foster creativity and innovation far beyond the classroom. "Art gives kids a chance to learn by doing instead of just being lectured to," says Jeff Gonzalez, a middle school art teacher in Dobbs Ferry, NY. "There's no right answer in art, which means they can explore, connect new ideas, and learn from what they feel were their successes and failures without negative consequences. They just can't get all that in math or history." This is why our current educational strategy is so shortsighted. The arts have definite practical applications for our kids' futures. A recent survey of business leaders rated creativity as a top skill that will only increase in importance. And as First Lady Michelle Obama said in a recent speech, "My husband and I believe strongly that arts education is essential for building innovative thinkers who will be our leaders of tomorrow."

The Obama administration is starting to act on this belief by launching a new survey to assess the state of arts education. Results aren't expected until 2011, but in the meantime some schools are proving that wonderful things can happen when arts are a valued part of the curriculum. When administrators at Middle School 223 in New York City's South Bronx realized that art classes were a big draw, they began to schedule them on Mondays and Fridays, when attendance was typically lower. Attendance went up immediately, says principal Ramon Gonzalez. More than that: "Once we got the students engaged and feeling confident in art, we were able to use that as a bridge to build engagement and confidence in other subjects. For example, we see that kids who don't normally like to talk in class will discuss their painting or hip-hop routine passionately, and this new skill spills over to other areas." That's one reason Gonzalez goes against current practice and eliminates periods of math, English language arts, and other subjects on a rotating basis to make room for 12-week blocks of visual arts, drama, dance, and both instrumental and digital music. "The academics haven't

suffered," says Gonzalez. "Instead, the whole school has improved."

Across the country, in Flagstaff, AZ, third-grade teacher Diane Immethun incorporates music into her lessons as part of Keeping Score, a program that trains classroom teachers to enhance learning through music. "I'm not a music teacher, but ever since I began using music, I've noticed an immense improvement in my students' logical thinking, creativity, and writing skills," says Immethun. "Music enhances their imaginations. I'll have them listen to Stravinsky's 'Rite of Spring' and make up a story. Their writing is much richer than it was before. Or I'll use 'Flight of the Bumblebee' to teach them how a composer gives a voice to a musical instrument and how that's similar to the way an author gives a character a voice in a book. It's a sophisticated concept for third-graders, but music helps them make the connection."

The Creative Connections Arts Academy, a K8 charter school in North Highlands, CA, has taken things even further. In addition to providing classes in music, drama, dance, and drawing and painting, the school has integrated the arts into almost all academics. In social studies, students act out plays or create drawings about the people they're studying; in math, they make the connection between quarter- and half-notes and fractions. In total, students are involved in the arts for a whopping four to six hours each day. "Kids get tired of rote learning, but they never get tired of the arts," says principal Joe Breault. "We have a wide variety of students, including kids with learning disabilities, but we have no trouble engaging any of them." And -- surprise! -- standardized-test scores have risen at all three of these schools (Immethun even warms up her students' brains on test days by having them sing rounds). "Research might not always be able to prove a direct connection to higher scores, but there's no doubt that an arts program makes kids better at everything they take on," says Breault. "It helps them become well-rounded, well-prepared thinkers and citizens of the world -- and that should be our main goal."

Save arts education at your school!

Arts programs are expensive so they're often the first thing to go. But they don't have to fall victim to the budget ax, especially if parents take action. Last spring, when the San Diego Unified School District decided to cut its art programs, parents organized and spent several hours pleading before the school board. The result: The board reversed its decision. "Parents have much more power than they realize," says Richard Kessler of the Center for Arts Education. "But they have to use it." How to do just that:

Sign up for Parenting's Mom Congress at Parenting.com/momcongress. You can connect with moms from across the country who are fighting for the same changes you are, plus access our Arts in Action tool kit, a one-stop-shop resource guide. You'll find links to top arts-advocacy organizations, along with a super-easy way to let your representative know that funding for arts education is one of your top priorities.

Find out what the law says. Contact your school board and state department of education to learn how many hours of arts education your state mandates. Then look at your child's schedule to see if that's what he's getting. Unfortunately, it's common for schools to ignore the law without repercussions.

Reach out to the principal. If you'd like to see more arts on the school schedule, gather a group of like-minded parents and ask the following questions: Does every grade receive arts instruction every week? Is there a budget for the arts? Is there a designated arts teacher for each discipline?

Speak up. Show how much you value arts education by sharing your child's experience at school-board meetings, and encourage other parents to do so. A few voices can go a long way.

Go public. Let your local news reporters know immediately if your school's arts program is being threatened. Another effective strategy: Submit a letter to the editor or an opinion piece about the importance of arts education.

Get riled up. Need more motivation? Watch the video of Tom Chapin's satirical (and hilarious) song "Not On the Test" (Notonthetest.com) and e-mail the link to school officials.

Help us celebrate creativity!

The National PTA has been honoring students' artistic achievements through the Reflections Program since 1969, and this year Parenting is proud to be the official national media sponsor. More than 500,000 students in pre-K through high school enter each year in one of six categories: musical composition, literature, visual arts, photography, film production, and dance choreography. Their work goes through four levels of judging at the local and state levels, before reaching the nationals. (Check out some of last year's entries at Parenting.com/pta.) "Reflections is so much more than a contest," says Chantay Carter, program coordinator for arts and education at the National PTA in Washington, DC. "I've heard incredible stories that it's helped kids who never thought they were smart actually raise their hand in class because they won a medal." Get all the details on the program at PTAreflections.org. And while you're there, check out the Mary Lou Anderson matching-grant program, as well. This fund (named for Reflections's founder) provides up to \$1,000 to local PTAs serving at-risk kids who want to establish an arts program in their school.

Nancy Kalish is coauthor of *The Case Against Homework*.